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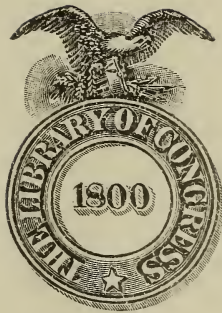
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COMMUNITY LIFE  
FOR WOMEN



*SISTER EVA MARY, C. T.*



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# COMMUNITY LIFE



*Eva Mary, Mother*

# COMMUNITY LIFE

*FOR WOMEN*

BY

SISTER EVA MARY

OF THE COMMUNITY OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

WITH INTRODUCTION

BY

BOYD VINCENT, D.D.

Bishop of Southern Ohio

Milwaukee

THE YOUNG CHURCHMAN CO.

1905

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TO THE LORD AND LOVER  
OF ALL VIRGIN SOULS  
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED  
WITH THE PRAYER  
THAT IT MAY BE TO HIS GLORY ONLY  
AND MAY ACCOMPLISH HIS WILL



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## PREFACE.



HERE is an important distinction in the Christian life which must not be forgotten. There is the required Christian life; and there is the voluntary "higher life." That is to say: There are depths of self-renunciation and heights of self-devotion for Christ's sake, which He encourages in some Christians, but which He does not demand of all. He denounced those Jews who denied family *duties*, even under the specious plea of "corban"; but of mere home *joys* he declared that "If any man hath left all . . . for My sake and the Gospel's . . . . he shall receive," etc. Speaking of voluntary poverty, He said to one young man: "If thou wouldst be perfect, go sell all that thou hast and give to the poor and come, take up the cross and follow Me, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven." As to voluntary singleness of life, "for the Kingdom of Heaven's sake," He said: "All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it." As to voluntary obedience to duly constituted human authority,

He said: "All things which they bid you do, that observe and do." As to the relative merits of the active and contemplative life He declared: "Martha, thou art troubled about many things; but Mary (who sat at His feet) hath chosen that good part which shall not be taken away." We have only to look at Christ's own life to see how faithfully He Himself acted on every one of these "counsels of perfection."

St. Paul was the most vehement advocate of the moral rights of Christians; but he asserts no less vehemently that the law of love is greater even than the law of liberty, and declares that any Christian who waives his rights and voluntarily denies himself for the good of others, is doing a most praiseworthy thing. About the unmarried state, he says that virginity is neither higher nor holier than marriage, but it is more desirable for those who want to wait upon the Lord without distraction (see I. Cor. vii.).

In short, there are souls, plainly recognized by the Gospel itself, who feel themselves called by Christ's own voice to a life of special devotion to Him and special service of their fellow men; and who feel called to this life, too, in terms of entire consecration and separation from the world. You may not have that special call yourself, you may not feel that special desire; but in Christ's own name let us bid God-speed to those who do. Call them "mystical souls," if you choose to—"enthusiasts," "devotees." That is really what they are;—souls with a different fibre or temperament, somehow, from our own more prosaic make-up. But they are what God Himself made them. They are the kind of souls,

too, from which have come the poets, prophets, saints, and martyrs of all time. They are the kind of women, filled with a peculiar spirit of personal devotion, who, in the Gospel story itself, sat at Christ's feet to hear Him, and followed and ministered unto Him of their substance and poured the precious ointment on His head; who were the last at His cross and burial and the first at the empty tomb. You cannot repress such womanly enthusiasm and devotion in the life of religion any more than you can elsewhere, and you ought not to want to; and therefore you are not wise either to despise it or to ignore it. It has asserted itself in every age of Christian history in one form or another, and it will continue to do so to the world's end. The rational thing, even the spiritual thing, seems to be to accept it as one of the workings of God's own Spirit on human nature, and so protect it and direct it and use it for the best ends possible.

The Sisterhood life must have its roots somewhere in the religious nature; for other religions than our own have encouraged and used it. It has a basis of its own in the earliest Christian history, too. From the earliest times there have been Orders of consecrated Christian women. They are not merely mediæval or Roman in origin. They did lapse at times into worthlessness and corruption. But modern Sisterhoods, avoiding former errors, and adding the active life to the contemplative, have won only gratitude and admiration for their usefulness, often from the most prejudiced.

This little book, so strong and conclusive in most of its arguments, whether it induces you personally



or not to feel a vocation for the work, does at least meet triumphantly all the common objections to the life, and not least when it declares: "Many of our laymen become converts to the Roman Church, a scattering few of our priests . . . but sisters from our Sisterhoods—never!"

At any rate, while our own Church has not, as yet and as a whole, formally adopted the Sisterhood idea and organization as a part of her authorized order, yet they are fast making a place for themselves among us, as an undeniable part of our beneficent Christian activities.

And, finally, that which most distinguishes the particular "Sisterhood of the Transfiguration" in this diocese, of which the author is the respected Mother Superior, is not its lavish generosity and devotion in the two Homes it maintains for the young and for the aged, or even its other intensely practical parish work; but rather, first, that it has always been loyally subservient to the advice and wishes of its own Bishop, and next, that, instead of trying to keep itself wholly independent of Church authority, it earnestly asks for such recognition by and subordination to the canonical authority of its own diocesan Convention.

Cincinnati, Ohio,

October 26, 1905.

BOYD VINCENT,

*Bishop of Southern Ohio.*



## COMMUNITY LIFE.

### CHAPTER I.

#### THE NEED OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES.



HIS is an age of organization. The futility of individual, unorganized effort is generally recognized. Wherever a need is felt, some organization, association, club—call it what you will—springs into existence to meet it. There are federations of labor against the tyranny of capital, and of capital against the excessive demands of labor and the waste of competition; there are guilds or associations of every kind of business, there are women's clubs for the emancipation of the intellect, and social organizations for the formation of an aristocracy, and Mothers' Clubs for the discussion of the problems of the nursery. There are charitable or-

ganizations for the relief of want and the reduction of crime, and Social Settlements for the social uplifting of the poor. In short, there is no department of human activity that is not covered or grappled with by some effort at organization. Perhaps there is too much of it; perhaps there is danger of losing sight of individual right in common need. That is a problem for the political economist of the future; we have the fact to consider and apply and take advantage of.

The Church has always worked through organized effort. It was her organization that made her feared, hated, persecuted, and at last triumphant in the old Roman world, that made her supreme in the anarchy of barbarian invasions and the system of feudalism that rose from their peculiar notion of individual liberty regardless of the common weal. At last and by slow degrees the world has learned the secret of her power—though not the secret of her vital energy, which is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit—and is feverishly applying the lesson so recently learned to its various problems, social, and scientific, and is lost in wonder at its own achievements. But shall the Church, while willingly teaching the world the secret of civilization in its power and progress, herself

relinquish her hold upon the tool wherewith she has carved out her seat of empire—a tool which may at any time become a weapon against her in the hands of a hostile world? Is her mission indeed accomplished in having taught at last the federation of man? Is there no further lesson to be taught in the Fatherhood of God? Has she no warfare against sin, no poor to relieve and help, no children to rear for Christ who loved the little ones? Is it safe to leave such cares and such labors in the hands of even a civilized world, and herself sit with folded hands in the impotence of old age? Then, why, in the name of common sense, in the light of her own past history, in the name of Her Mighty Indweller, the Holy Spirit, are there some among us calling themselves by the sacred Name of Christ, who cavil at her organization, who advocate disruption and disintegration, who sneer at her ordered Communities?

It is not the purpose here to discuss her Apostolic Constitution which, thank God, is defended against attacks of her enemies, and, alas! of her own children, by the most virile minds of the age; but only one form of her organized life, that of religious Communities, and in particular, Communities of women. Does the Church need such Communities, and

how may she use them? Does she need them first—in her devotional life?

The ideal of the Church is the keeping of a perpetual Sabbath to the Lord, every day to be a day of worship and of praise. To this end were the daily offices of Morning and Evening Prayer set forth in her book of common worship, and her provisions for a daily Eucharist. But where are her congregations for the daily services? The majority of her people are far too busy and are much too scattered to attend church even once a day, far less twice or thrice. Their lives are not arranged for it. What man of business can take the time from his work for even a short service daily? Few would have the liberty to do so, for the majority of men work under obedience, and the few who have command of their own time are pressed into a strenuous competition that demands more of them, longer hours and more concentrated attention, than they demand of their employees. What busy mother or housewife can leave her babies or her household cares to go out to the parish church for a daily service? She is not dressed for it, her day is not arranged for it, her duties are necessarily prescribed for her by the requirements of her husband and children. But the young people—have they no leisure in



this overcrowded life of ours? Do the young not follow the example of their elders? Are they apt to go to church when their parents do not? And besides, are they not fitting themselves for as keen a struggle as the older generation are having, and the days are all too short even for them, with their school and their music, their technical education and their social clubs. And so the clergy who are faithful to their ordination vow, and hold their daily services in empty churches, are, perhaps unduly, disheartened at what seems to them a general apostasy, and are the derision of their more easy-going brethren and of a success-loving world because of the futility of their efforts. But if in every city there were religious Communities where faithful priests could hold the daily services to a fit and devout congregation of women or of men, for it applies to both, whose lives are arranged around the daily services as a centre, what a strength it would be to the spiritual life of the Church, upholding to herself and to the world her true ideal of perpetual worship, encouraging her priests with the sense of fellowship and support, removing the scandal of unattended services from the eyes of the world, calling down the blessing of God by the unceasing round of devout prayer.

If they served no other end than this, religious Communities of both men and women would be of inestimable value to the Church, to be encouraged, to be multiplied, to be strengthened by her with the greatest care.

But while this is the chief object of the Community life, and let us never lose sight of it in the lower uses, it is by no means the only one. The Church, indeed, has taught the world to build and equip and maintain hospitals and orphanages, schools and almshouses, as well as reformatories and prisons and insane asylums. But has she therefore shifted all her responsibility of active charity upon the shoulders of a willing world, delighted with the role of Lady Bountiful, and for the present dabbling in charity as she does in electricity, experimenting, applying, and throwing aside the old for the new? How long will this zeal for good works last? Have not attentive ears already caught some notes of dissatisfaction and disappointment with her toy, whose newness is somewhat tarnished by the unexpected ill success of her eleemosynary schemes—the hospitals that the poor, sometimes too justly, dread as houses of physiological experiment and vivisection practised on men instead of animals—the almshouses filled with tramps in the winter, idle

and vicious, only to go forth in the summer more idle and more vicious still—the orphanages with their high-salaried matrons and occasional revelations of tyranny—the insane asylums that seem to increase instead of diminish insanity in all its appalling forms—and last and dearest, the public schools, splendid in their discipline and equipment, that seem in the large cities at least, to be institutions where boys and girls, unhealthily mixed, may become graduates in every form of vice as well as in the useful branches of knowledge, and which fill our prisons with criminals as well as our counting houses with clerks? Is this too dark a picture? It is only the dark side of a picture that has indeed many brighter colors to redeem it, but that dark side, unperceived and unconsidered at first, is growing, is gradually forcing itself upon the attention of thinking people. When it has so grown as to be seen even by the unthinking, then State charities are doomed, for the world will not father a failure. Who, then, will fall heir to the great buildings and vast apparatus now accumulating in each state, but that organization which shall have the staff of workers to carry them on, and which shall have approved itself to the common sense of men by its success in the very department in

which the State has failed, the administration of charity? How, then, may the Church so differentiate her charities from those of the State that she may achieve success when the latter must confess failure? How, indeed, compete with the State at all, which has almost limitless resources, while the Church suffers from a chronic poverty, save by following her own ancient traditions in administering her charities through her religious Communities? They are undoubtedly cheap; only a plain living to be guaranteed, no high salaries to be paid; and then as to efficiency, they provide zeal and training and numbers. And as no high salaries are paid, so are there no small ones, the underlings being not servants but members of the Community, doing a humbler but no less important work than the highest, and infused with the same spirit of zeal and loyalty. Carrying their religious feeling into all their work, religion that teaches care for the soul as well as the body, charity in their hands is permeated with a regenerative instead of a debilitating quality. The idle and vicious are not attracted to almshouses where religious duties, more detestable even than work, are required of them; children trained in orphanages conducted by religious women are brought up in



an atmosphere of love and are taught to be industrious and faithful, to show their faith by their works; hospitals managed by religious Communities are for the relief of suffering rather than for the advance of science, where the sick may be cured rather than serve as subjects for lecture and experiment. From the Sisterhood schools, go forth young women not merely educated and accomplished, but with high ideals and earnest purpose. Alas! that there are no Brotherhood schools for boys! Who can tell what might not be done even for the insane in the soothing atmosphere of a religious Community, whose hearts were full of pity for the poor unfortunates committed to their care? I have not touched upon reformatories and prisons, but already a certain class of criminal women are being committed to Sisterhoods for reform where it may be possible, with immensely superior results to the old method of a matron jailer, perhaps as low in moral tone as some of her prisoners.

While all Communities are not equally successful, and some are more fitted to one kind of work than to another, it is safe to say that there is no institutional work that could not be better done by a Community than by individual effort, more economically, and in a more relig-

ious spirit, and therefore answering better to the real need. No work for the body can be successfully done unless the soul is also benefited. The soul is too important a factor in human life ever to be disregarded, but unless the spiritual side of humanity is constantly being emphasized in the daily life of the workers in hospital and orphanage, the physical need is sure to obscure and perhaps entirely overshadow the other, and the recipients of charity have had their manhood taken out of them by being given relief from pain, God's stimulus to righteousness, at no cost to themselves nor any effort towards self-mastery. The hearts of the young and of the suffering are peculiarly susceptible to religious impressions, and if they see before them and in a measure take part in a daily round of prayer and praise to God, forcibly illustrated in the patience and tenderness of the care they receive, it would be a hardened soul indeed that would not be uplifted out of its sordid selfishness, and for a time at least, enabled to lay hold upon spiritual things. Charities conducted upon such a principle, no matter how extended they may be, how indiscriminate apparently, make for strength and not for weakness, develop what manhood there is left, and are a power for righteousness in the world.

But the Community life is needed not only to uphold the Church's devotional life, not merely to carry on her work of charity and education, but also as a sphere of activity for her own children. There is a great cry made that the labor market is overstocked, that women who do not need employment are displacing men in factory and counting room and school, that the competition is peculiarly unfair because they work not for bread but for pin money and for the sake of having something to do, and therefore work for less than living wages. Whatever truth there may be in such statements, it is a fact that all the world seems to be working. Even young women of families that can afford a life of leisure, after a year or two of society, become the world's workers, as teachers, as actors, as authors, as artists. It is almost impossible to form a Church Guild of young women that does not have its meetings in the evening because its members work during the day. Factories and stores are crowded with young life, and a man at forty-five who has not made himself indispensable by his ability, must stand aside and be supported by his sons and daughters. Now what is the meaning of this wholesale race for work, this ardor of competition between the young and old? May not this

be the explanation? In the pioneer life of this country, extending to within less than half a century ago, every one in the family had to work to subdue the land and bring it into civilization. The tilling of farms and the building of cities, the transforming of a wilderness, taxed the utmost energies of an energetic race; but that time of stress and labor is past, leaving behind it habits and instincts of activity noble in themselves, painful to repress, and which seek an outlet in business for lack of something better, and by this feverish over-activity, produce those remarkable fluctuations from prosperity to panic, that have marked our commercial history for a generation past.

But those energies turned into the channel of the religious life would find an object worthy of themselves, and at the same time relieve the singular pressure upon the business world. Many a young woman who feels that her vocation is not for marriage, and wearied and disgusted with the emptiness and narrowness of a woman's life unennobled by the care of children or any earnest occupation, plunges into business as a refuge from frivolous society or equally frivolous amateur charities, in which she feels she has perhaps done more harm than good. What a boon to such a woman, and there are



many of them who do not suspect the cause of their restlessness and dissatisfaction, would be the Community life, with its opportunities of useful activity and its high training of all the powers of mind and soul! What a strength to the Church to be able to utilize and conserve energies now too often devoted to the service of the world! What are her priests thinking of, that they do nothing to turn the flow of this rich tide into her own fair harbors? Alas for the wrecked vocations that might have been saved, and alas for the Church and her clergy that let slip their priceless opportunities! What wonder a blight, cold as frost, lies upon her services, her charities, her missions? How can she ask more of God, of men, of workers, of blessings, when she throws away those she has in her hand? Of old she subdued empires and cleared forests and civilized barbarians and converted the heathen with the weapon and the tool of the Community life. It still lies within her hand to be used as either a weapon or a tool, to wage war upon sin or to till the soil of the newly converted, but it lies useless in a nerveless grasp. Mighty as its possibilities are, it is strong only as wielded by the good right arm of the Church of God. With it she may bring a world to its knees, or she may drop it in help-

less impotence upon the ground. It is but a tool, a weapon, cunningly devised, sharp and polished, fit for its use, but with no life of its own apart from the Church. When will she awake from her strange forgetfulness and smite the world once again with her strong battle-axe, mighty as a weapon, the most useful and the most primitive of tools?

## CHAPTER II.

### VOCATION.



THE initial difficulty of the Community life is, to some people, the greatest of all, the being sure of the vocation. It causes much perplexity and unrest so long as it is a debatable question, and it being a matter personal and individual to each soul, but little help can be given save in clearing away misconceptions.

In the first place, it is God's choosing, not ours; His calling to the soul, not the soul calling to God. He must speak first, and the soul's answer is its response to vocation, its acceptance or rejection of it.

This removes it at once from the business notion of vocation, that the Community life is to be chosen as a method of spending one's life profitably to the Church of God and to our own

edification. We do not choose it, but we are chosen to it, and it not unfrequently happens that much unwillingness has to be overcome before the soul can accept its vocation. God chooses not as we would, and often waits with long patience for the object of His choice. When the outward difficulties have seemed insuperable, and inward distaste for it has amounted almost to rebellion, yet has He had His way at last, and will have, with every soul that really, however imperfectly, gives itself to be moulded by Him. Hence a strong dislike to and apparent unfitness for the religious life are no proofs that there is no vocation. On the contrary, a soul in a healthy spiritual condition whom God had not called, would be apt not to think about it at all.

There is no doubt but that if God has chosen a soul to the Virgin life, He will reveal His choice to that soul and give it an opportunity to accept or reject it. But sometimes from lack of spiritual insight and training, the soul fails to understand and respond; and so finally, the inward voice is stifled and silenced.

There are four notes by which we may recognize vocation.

First, it is individual. There are two aspects in which a Christian may be regarded:



as a member of the Body of Christ, the Church, and as an individual soul before her God. It is in this latter relationship that vocation comes to her, and so it comes not through any sacramental channel, but in the quiet closet when she is on her knees in private prayer and meditation, in secret and individual communion with her God. The enthusiastic resolve made in a great congregation, under tremendous emotional pressure, is much to be distrusted. The quiet call that comes, almost unheeded at first, in the calmness of a meditative hour, or in the course of a day's work faithfully done, the naming of your name and with it some task, some way of life, undesired perhaps, that draws out the cry, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord"—this is vocation.

And the second note of vocation is repetition. He does not depart at the soul's prayer, but calls again and again. Sometimes the call comes in childhood and is repeated again and again until middle life; sometimes for a shorter period, but always with a repetition almost monotonous in its exactness, though often varying in intensity; sometimes seeming faint and far off, sometimes close and direct, with startling distinctness and force. It comes not by our own volition, intruding upon times and

occupations when, perhaps, we would willingly have barred it out, and again silent when we would naturally have expected it to assert itself. It is not the product of our own thoughts or fancies; often running counter to them, or breaking in upon them with the suddenness of an interruption.

The third note of vocation is definiteness, and this is of gradually increasing power. At first one is often puzzled by the call, and asks again and again, "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" before the answer comes with any degree of distinctness, but the bewilderment sometimes comes, not from any lack of definiteness in the call, but from lack of correspondence in the outward circumstances, as for example, when the call to the Sisterhood life comes to one brought up a Presbyterian, by no means an impossibility, and perhaps occurring more frequently than we imagine. In such a case the very definiteness of the call would but deepen the bewilderment. It is not impossible, too, for us purposely to deceive ourselves with regard to the definiteness of the call to a life distasteful to us. We are apt to think we do not know what God wants of us, when in reality we do not wish to do as He bids us. We are master hands at self-deceit, but we cannot hide from

God, nor will He hide His purposes from us; and sooner or later we come face to face with the duty of definite answer to a definite proposition.

The fourth note of vocation is authority. Any fancied call to a life not approved by the Church, or that leads out of the Church, or makes us independent of the Sacraments and Ordinances of the Church, is not of God. We see it happening around us very frequently, the false vocation. Women thinking themselves called to be healers in Christian Science or prophets in Theosophy, and holding themselves independent of the ordinances of Christ, and even the Salvation Army and its workers are by no means free from that reproach; men leaving the priesthood of the Church for Rome or for the sects, in a mistaken zeal for unity; and there are hundreds of grosser instances of mistaken vocation, leading to the foundations of heresies and monstrous abortions of religion, which are very clearly from the devil. We must remember the counsel of the Apostle, to try the spirits and see whether they be of God, and the unfailing test is the known ordinances of God. Try the unknown by the known. If at variance with them, then we may be sure it is not the voice of God that has been calling us. Where the call is not in any way extraor-

dinary, but simply to the Community life as established by the Church and approved by her from the earliest years of her history, there can be little doubt but that if it have the other notes it is a genuine vocation, and the soul that resists it, sins deeply against God, rejecting the future that He has planned for it.

Let us consider now the Virgin character, the dispositions of the soul necessary to enable it to respond to vocation. These, too, can be classified into four, to correspond to the four notes of vocation.

First, there must be attention. We cannot hear the call unless we listen to it. We must have the hearing ear that Samuel had, who knew not that God was calling him, yet heard the call and answered. When in the silence of an hour of prayer God calls us by our name, it is to claim our attention, because He has some message for us; and that leads us to the second disposition, which is concentration.

We must have not only the hearing ear, but the asking heart; not merely the readiness to come at call, but also to go at command. There are some children who are very quick to come when called, but forget the errand they are sent on before it is accomplished. They have attention but not concentration. So we often



treat God. We respond when He calls us, but then we respond also to every other call that comes to us with equal readiness, and so, for lack of concentration, we lose the impression of God's will made upon our careless hearts. Concentration is the perseverance of attention to one thing, and it is gained by changing one's occasional hour of prayer into a regular and stated devotion not dependent upon emotion or convenience, but held to with firm resolution in the lack of both.

The third disposition is the submission of the will to God, and this is never gained without a struggle. The vocation, if it be a real one, has always some elements of renunciation in it, some family ties, some personal liberty, some private ambitions to be offered up to God. We may, indeed, look with some distrust upon a vocation that has nothing to give up, no struggle to make, nothing that is hard in it. We may well stop and ask ourselves, when such is the case, if it be really God's will we are accepting and not just our own. There is no sin in the struggle of the human will with God. We find it in our blessed Lord's suffering in Gethsemane. The sin comes in the final rejection of God's will, or in a partial instead of entire submission of our own will. We may not temporize with

God, nor try to satisfy Him with half when He demands all.

The fourth disposition is desire. This may seem a direct contradiction to the struggle noted above, but it is not really so. Not only is the desire the fruit of the struggle brought to a successful end, it is nearly always an accompaniment of the struggle itself. The desire seems to be something independent of the will, something higher and more far-reaching in its gaze. The will sees the immediate sacrifices to be made, sacrifices of ease, of pleasure, of affections; the desire sees afar the high reward of endeavor, the close walk with God, the peace and retirement and calm joys of a soul that has mastered self and possesses God. This desire is a direct gift of the Holy Spirit given with vocation and most necessary to its accomplishment in us. As a marriage without love, so would be the religious life without desire; a mockery of the holiest ordinances of God.

The initiative, then, in the vocation to the religious life, must come from God, but once the call has come in such a way as not to be mistaken, then the soul must accept it with all its consequences. But those consequences, while involving much sacrifice and pain, never involve real spiritual loss. Vocation is a fire that il-

lumines the soul but does not consume. As the Virginity of the Blessed Mother of God is typified in the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed, so is it with every faithful soul chosen to the Virgin life. The fire burns and men expect to see the vitality, the human graces and affections to wither away and be consumed, but the miracle of Grace continues; and denied maternity, the Virgins of the Lord are given the grace of Motherhood, denied the Union and completeness of a human marriage, they are given completion in a close and holy union with Christ; denied the wisdom and the riches of this world, they are given heavenly wisdom and heavenly riches; denied the grace and joy of home life, they make homes for the homeless and bring joy to the joyless. And so these frail bodies of clay are made temples of the Holy Ghost, the living God; are impelled to things contrary to their nature and yet remain in their integrity unconsumed. Not content with dwelling in the Church, He seeks the individual dwelling of each humble and faithful soul; and mighty as is the burden of indwelling Divinity, our humanity remains undestroyed, but chastened, beautified, glorified.

## CHAPTER III.

### PROBATION.



IN the awakening of vocation, one of the first questions that naturally spring up in the mind is, how to get into touch with Sisterhood life through some special community. Too often, unfortunately, the questioner cannot go to her rector for the answer to her question. Comparatively few of our parish priests are in sympathy with the Sisterhood life, still fewer know anything about it, or have any knowledge of particular Communities. In such a case one's best friend would be one of the Church Annuals, which give a list of the principal Sisterhoods with location of mother house and some idea of the work done by them, usually also the names of Visitor and of Chaplain. In writing for information, however, it is usually best to



address directly the Mother Superior of the Order. It is not necessary to know her name; a letter addressed by the title alone and the name and place of the Mother House is sufficient. Do not suppose for a moment that you commit yourself to anything by such a step. The hesitation you may feel about committing yourself to a new and untried form of life is fully balanced by an equal hesitation on the part of any well regulated Sisterhood to admitting a new and untried element into their common life. Under no circumstances would anyone be admitted into a Community without a trial of sufficient length to form a real test of character on the one hand, and of the requirements of the life on the other. This test usually takes the form of a preliminary visit by the candidate during which she may view the Sisterhood from the outside, gain some acquaintance with its individual members, and take some part in its work. The Sisterhood, on the other hand, is studying the candidate, noting her capacities, her adaptability, her possibilities as a companion through life as well as her utility as a worker. At the end of the visit she is as free to leave as any visitor would be, or she may be dismissed with a few words of kindly advice and in perfect friendliness.

If, on the other hand, the mutual survey is satisfactory and a closer knowledge desired, the candidate may be given the rule to read, and after reading it, may make her application to the Superior to be received as postulant. No vows are taken, but the postulant usually wears a simple dress that marks her off from the visitors on the one hand and from the Sisters on the other. She is, as the name indicates, asking for admission to the Sisterhood, knocking at its door, looking through the slowly opening portal at the domestic life within but not yet a participant in it.

The Postulate in most Sisterhoods lasts about six months. Withdrawal at any time during it is permitted and may at any time be requested by the Superior. If, however, this period of probation is successfully passed, the next step is the novitiate. The clothing of the novice in the Sister's habit is a service at which all the Sisters at the Mother House are present. At this time the novice receives her Sister's name and is henceforth addressed as Sister. She is admitted far more intimately into the life than the postulant, is under the direct charge of, and with special obedience to, the Mistress of Novices, has her hours of instruction and of work, takes full

part in the daily offices of the Sisterhood, and has her appointed place in the chapel, refectory, and the common room, and her set times for private prayer and meditation. In short, she is given full experience of the practical working of the rule in everything except in the governing functions, in which of course she can take no part. During the novitiate, which may last from one to three years, according to the rule of the particular Community of which she may be a member, she is free to withdraw or she may be dismissed if she shows herself wholly unfit for the life without herself being conscious of it. On the other hand, however, she may acquit herself during her novitiate to the satisfaction of the Superior and the Mistress of Novices, and be recommended by them to the chapter of the whole Sisterhood. Every Sister is expected to vote on the profession of a new sister, and in large and scattered Communities, where many votes have to be sent in by mail, it is sometimes customary for the novice to spend the last year of her probation in visiting the different houses of the Community, both to become acquainted with all parts of the work and to learn to know the personnel of the Sisterhood, as well as to give them the opportunity of studying her. In every Sisterhood a majority of votes is neces-

sary to her election; in some, a two-thirds majority may be required. If she fail of election she must leave the Sisterhood, and may return to secular life, marry, and bear children, without fear and without reproach. She has at least gained experience and training in one or more kinds of Church work; and while she may not wear the habit of the Sisterhood from which she has been excluded, there is nothing to prevent her application to other Sisterhoods, or to her Bishop for the canonical examinations of a deaconess, if she prefer that form of life and work.

Any Sister, however, who has been elected and has taken her final vows, breaks those vows only at great peril to her soul. The Sisterhood will do nothing to restrain a discontented Sister from leaving them, both because discontent even in one member would poison the whole corporate life, and because voluntariness is of the very essence of the life, and a forced keeping of the vows would be a worse sin than their breaking. When Sisters break their vow of obedience and yet keep their vow of chastity there is less sin than in breaking the vow in every point, yet the unattached Sisters work grievous harm to the cause of Community life, the very faults which made its order and discipline distasteful



to them becoming more conspicuous on their release from that discipline, and being too often attributed to the very manner of life that strove in vain to correct them.

I have gone into some detail with regard to admission into Sisterhoods to show how every step is guarded against a mistake that would be as disastrous to the Community as to the individual. The length of the probation also produces well-trained workers, and every Sister professed in any of our Sisterhoods is adding materially to the working force of the Church.

Correspondence with relatives, and, to a limited extent, with personal friends, is always allowed in every Sisterhood, and while the mail usually passes through the Superior's hands, this is more to insure its safe delivery than for oversight. In cases of doubt and perplexity, however, a Sister should go with the confidence of a daughter to her Mother Superior to ask her advice with regard to a correspondence that is causing her disturbance and unrest, and the Superior greatly appreciates the confidence, and knowledge gained of her young sister's correspondents by occasionally having letters voluntarily brought to her for perusal.

During the time of probation, as well as after profession, every Sister is allowed some

sort of vacation every year, usually of a month's duration. This time may be spent with one's family if desired. In cases where the Sister has no family or has felt them estranged from her by her resolute adherence to her vocation, her time of rest is arranged for by the Superior, usually at some other house belonging to the Community. Proper attention to the rules of health is considered a religious duty in every Sisterhood, the consequences of neglect in this matter being too serious to allow of disregard. Put away from your mind all thought of prolonged fasts and weary vigils, of sleeping cold, and hard living. The severe asceticism of the Middle Ages does not find much favor in any of our present Communities, the conditions of the times and the exigencies of work being so much more strenuous, and of themselves giving much room for self-denial and even self-immolation if need be. At the same time the regularity of the life, long hours for sleep, sufficient though plain food, comfortable though simple accommodations, secure the best sanitary conditions obtainable in our modern world. While the work is severe and continuous and is often a great strain on the sympathies as well as the physique, there are hours of rest and of public and private prayer scattered throughout the day that

do much to relieve the pressure, while any great responsibility is so shared by the whole Community and divided among its various members as not to rest too heavily upon any one. It is a great thing just to be freed from the incubus of servants. Where there are Sisters enough to do their own work, or where it is part of their work to direct and train young girls in housework, the household wheels run much more smoothly than in many families where large sums are paid for service grudgingly and indifferently done. In fact all the elements of happiness and of health meet together in the simple, sane, wise administration of a Community of women devoted to the service of God, loving one another, and ready and willing and able to do any service required of them. If one loses health and happiness in such a life it is because she brings the seeds of disease and discontent with her from her former life. This is by no means impossible, many people mistaking discontent with their present surroundings for vocation to religion. Most Sisterhoods require from their candidates some assurance of their good health and freedom from hereditary taint of mind or body, and also freedom from paramount family duties.

In the present popular attitude towards

the Church and especially towards the religious life, it is impossible to consider family opposition in itself a bar to admission or we would have no Sisters; but the conditions of that opposition are always inquired into, and if it is such that it would bar marriage equally with the religious life, the aspirant is kindly advised to devote herself to those home duties until God shall open the way for her to fulfil her vocation. A few years of patient waiting sometimes make a good preparation for the Sister's life, and often give an opportunity to study the work of the different Communities and finally, perhaps, make a choice other than one would have made if unhindered in the first instance. Do not wait too long, however. When the character becomes set it is not easy to make it flexible again, and for this reason some of the Sisterhoods have an age limit beyond which they will not receive candidates.

For the candidate must not be too old to acquire the new habits of life which may be required in the Sister's daily routine. For one thing, a habit of silence is part of every Sister's training. Not merely must there be a certain atmosphere of silence in even the busiest of the religious houses, but every Sister should



have that as an intangible atmosphere about herself—not in unapproachableness nor in any lack of courteous responsiveness to the conversation of others, but there should be and usually is a noticeable absence of volubility and dwelling upon unnecessary detail so common among women. The hours of private meditation are high and lofty subjects of thought, the reading of books that develop the mind rather than answer the fancy, tend to develop a temper of mind that unconsciously rises above the small weaknesses too often fostered in the secular life of women.

Silence at meals may seem at first to the novice, accustomed to the eminently social character of the dining room of ordinary family life, as cold and constrained, and making too much of a business of eating and drinking. This feeling gradually passes away, however, as she perceives that every meal is looked upon as a form of worship, beginning with a solemn dedication of the food to God's service and ending with thanksgiving. As to the quality of food, while it is plain, it is substantial, and, being prepared with that delicate attention to perfect cleanliness that is characteristic of every part of Sisterhood life and work, is palatable even to weak appetites. The flow of talk which

is restrained throughout the busy day, confined as it is chiefly to the necessary instructions and exigencies of the work, so avoiding the distractions and waste of time caused by irrelevant conversation, finds its outlet in the Community room at the recreation hour. In a large Sisterhood the novices may have their own Common room apart from the Sisters, but in the small Sisterhoods or in the Branch houses such division is neither possible nor advisable, and the newcomers are admitted into the charm of a conversational hour that reminds one a little of the descriptions of those delightful salons in France of the old regime, where discussions of literature and art displaced court gossip and intrigue, and where gaiety and good-humored wit consorted with seriousness of thought and purpose.

Youth is the time when we form our habits, when we set the course of our future development. The talkative woman of middle age can hardly acquire the habit of seasonable silence, the silent and diffident can hardly, when the character is set, unbend to the geniality of the social hour.

Sacrifice and renunciation, which come easily to the heart of youth, become as easily the habit of later life, but a youth that is passed

in self-pleasing or in weak vacillation will rarely develop a character suited to the Sisterhood life. Vocation makes itself heard usually in youth. There is a high tide of spiritual impulse when it may be launched into the channel of probation, but if the tide be allowed to ebb out, leaving the soul in the waste sands of a spent vocation, it can hardly produce the fruits of common Christianity, and certainly not those of the counsels of perfection.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE REGULAR LIFE.



THE regular life—from the Latin *regulus*, meaning rule—is the life governed by a stated rule. In the Middle Ages, the regular clergy as distinguished from the parish clergy were those gathered into Communities and living by a religious rule; the regular orders of monks, as distinguished from friars, and, later, the Jesuits, were those who had a settled rule which they were bound to observe. It is perhaps necessary to make this explanation, because the word *regular* has lost its primitive meaning of religious rule. The word *Methodist* had a similar origin, being applied to the followers of Wesley before they left the Church as those who used method in their religion, a settled plan of life which was so ordered that certain

devotional practices should form part of every day.

We can readily see that regularity in the ordinary business of life is of the utmost importance; regular hours for business, for meals, for rising and retiring, and in the care and training of children. The one thing we leave to the chance of feeling or of leisure is our devotions. Women who would be horrified not to have a regular hour for bathing the baby, never dream of having a regular hour for saying their prayers. Of course we are not considering the hasty little snatch of a minute or two that most people content themselves with morning and evening, but a settled period of the day, lasting from twenty minutes to an hour, with regular, stated devotions, including Bible reading and some devotional exercises, meditation, or devout reading. Most people will say they have no time for that, though they find time for a little of everything else in their crowded lives. Some people will say that such regularity is making religion too mechanical, that it should be spontaneous and from the heart, though I think these same people would not consider their love for their children the less from their heart, because it found expression



in duties and services done for them at regular times.

As a matter of fact, the reason there is so little genuine piety among us is because so little effort is made to cultivate it. The spiritual life requires the same care as any other of our faculties. It must have daily aliment; it must not be left to the chance of a passing and spasmodic emotion. If we do not care enough about it to give it twenty minutes a day, we must not be surprised that it should die, that the fountain of emotion should in time cease to flow; and if all our thoughts and desires are limited to this world and this life, it ought not to surprise us if there is no place prepared for us in the world to come. Indeed, what happiness would there be in heaven for those who do not desire and love God on earth? We are told that the main occupation of heaven is the worship of God. What a weariness perpetual worship will be to those who have not accustomed themselves to worship at all! Can we doubt, then, the duty of a stated rule of prayer incumbent upon all Christians?

The Community life is formed upon its Rule—it could not exist without it. The Rule is its very heart. It pervades the whole day and every hour of the day. It is never absent



from the mind of those bound to observe it. It is the Yoke our Lord tells us of that teaches lowliness and meekness and brings rest to the soul. For the soul does find rest and peace in regularity as much as the mind and body do. The habits of the Society are formed by the Rule, its daily routine settled by it, and the temper of the members of the Community is moulded by it. It is usually in two parts: one controlling the outward life, the dress, work, hours of prayer, recreation, and the like, and this is called the exterior Rule; the other, the interior Rule, directs the disposition of mind in which all the acts of the exterior rule should be done. The object of the Rule is twofold, (*a*) the personal holiness of each individual member, and (*b*) the harmony of the whole Community. No one is allowed to enter a Sisterhood until she has become thoroughly familiar with the Rule, and has given her hearty assent to it. Hence the adoption of the Rule is in each case voluntary; but once adopted, obedience to it in every detail is obligatory. It is for this reason that candidates for the Sister's life must always pass through a novitiate before being allowed to take the vows. It is during the novitiate that they are taught the Rule and learn to practise it. In every large Sisterhood

one of the older Sisters is usually Mistress of the Novices, and it is her duty to explain the Rule, to train the novices in it, and herself to set the example of perfect obedience to it. In very small Sisterhoods, that are just beginning their life, this duty usually falls upon the Superior. A long novitiate is a great advantage both to the candidate and to the Sisterhood, and there should be very few cases in which it should be allowed to be shortened. It gives the Community well-trained Sisters, and enables the candidate fully to test herself before taking the irrevocable step of the vow.

The discipline of the Rule is constant. It enters into and regulates every detail of the daily life, work, and recreation, and prayer, companionship with others, and hours of solitude. With a constant pressure, it moulds each individual that comes under its obedience, paring away individual peculiarities and excrescences of zeal, toning up deficiencies and depressions of character, making a place for each member of the Community, and making that member fit her own place.

It must not be supposed that this process of fitting the individual to her place in the Community really injures her individuality, or that all members of the Community are made on the

same model and come out after a few years of training exactly alike. On the contrary, individual beauties of character are brought out and developed by the Rule; but by harmonizing them with others, not by contrasting them with defects. It is like the taking of pieces of bric-a-brac of varying value and form from the confusion of a shop, and arranging them with care and taste in a drawing room; the pieces are not less individual than before; but harmonized with one another and with their surroundings, they give the general impression of order and unity; or in playing the piano, the notes are not less individual when harmonized into chords and beautiful music, than when struck at haphazard into harsh discords. It is thus that the Rule plays upon the various individuals of a Community, striking some different tone out of each, and yet in perfect harmony with all the others, and forming a unity out of the various elements that are brought together for combination.

While it is the object of the Rule to bring harmony of life and unity in work out of the Community as a whole, it is also its purpose to develop and perfect each individual in the way of holiness; and while the exterior Rule is especially adapted to the one object, so it is the

interior Rule which is designed to attain the other. The various acts of the Community and its members are directed by the Rule, and the very thoughts and intents of the heart are not free from its control. A faithful obedience to the Rule in its spirit as well as in the letter, in the interior dispositions as well as in the outward acts, produces a character self-contained and self-constrained, in which self, with its egotism, its passions, its indulgences, has been mastered in the interests of the Community and the service of God, in which natural gaiety of mind has not degenerated into frivolity, nor natural gravity into gloom, but both meet in a Christian cheerfulness and equality of temper best described by the word serenity; in which practical good sense is mingled with exalted principle, and so escapes commonplaceness on the one hand, which is so often taken for common sense, and impracticability on the other, which is sometimes mistaken for spiritual exaltation.

The Rule cultivates a spirit which will be free from captious criticism, and enlarged with a genuine humility which will neither fear the future nor regret the past, and which will rest its present in a sure anchorage upon God. Such an one will love solitude and retreat as



a time of communion with her Lord, and will not shun the society and companionship of others, whether members of the Community or not. She will not think much of her influence or power over others when with them, nor will she talk much of herself or of her experiences; she will rather strive to learn from their example and their conversation how better to serve and love her Lord. She will not recognize her portrait as here drawn, but will know of someone else to whom the description applies. She will shrink from praise, knowing how many times she has failed to live up to her rule. She will not be angry when blamed, even though the blame may be unjust, but will strive to make it an occasion of penitence for occasions when she should have been blamed and was not.

If you say such a character is impossible, it will but show your ignorance of what the grace of God can accomplish in a human heart that has given itself unreservedly to His direction. The Religious life is now and always has been illuminated and made beautiful by such characters, and there have been many even in the distractions and trials of secular life; but fewer, because there are fewer in the world who live in close and secret obedience to a Religious Rule. For it is a character that can be formed

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only by rule, regular habits holding the soul true in its hours of depression to its aspirations in the hour of exaltation.

A good Sister, then, must love her rule, make it a part of herself, give it a whole-souled obedience. The least infraction of it should be a pain to her; and yet she should be so thoroughly imbued with the spirit of it that she should not hesitate to sacrifice some minor detail in the interests of charity. The narrow, mechanical observance of the Rule is as much to be avoided as a lax and self-indulgent neglect. It is the large-hearted observance of the whole that makes the good Sister. There are many good women in a Community, but comparatively few good Sisters, even in our largest and best equipped Sisterhoods.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE VOW.



SACRIFICE to be acceptable to God must be human. It has been the instinct of man from the very beginning, that the blood of the inferior animals could not atone for man's sin. Man alone could be offered for man. And this instinct is satisfied and justified in the Sacrifice of Christ upon the cross. But that sacrifice avails us nothing unless we add ourselves to it. In vain we would offer something else, money, time, service—the sacrifice must be ourselves, with the human will offered up as an oblation. It was for this reason Christ's sacrifice was necessary; not to appease an angry God, but to make it possible for men to offer up themselves as an acceptable sacrifice to God, which can only be when, cleansed and purified from sin,

they are in sacramental union with Christ. This offering, then, is made by every Christian at his Baptism, and it is made for life by taking a life vow of threefold obligation: of faith, of renunciation of sin, and of obedience.

It was in order to the more perfect fulfilment of this vow, that the Virgin life was instituted in the very beginning of the Church and continued to the present time in its well ordered Communities. The threefold vow of the Community life is but a closer application of the Baptismal vow, the vow of poverty being the outcome of faith in God's providence and promise; of chastity being the renunciation of all the entanglements of the world, the flesh, and the devil; and the vow of obedience to God's holy commandments, not only as expressed in His general law, but as particularized in the Rule of the Community. That it should be taken for life is of its very essence, the Baptismal vow being for life; and those Communities in the Roman Church in which the vow is not for life, but repeated year by year, accomplish this purpose by evasion, the intention in each repetition being for life. Granting these exceptions, which are so only in appearance, not in fact, the general custom in Communities is that the vow should be binding for life. It gives

that sense of stability and permanence as necessary to happiness in the religious life as in marriage, and a broken vow is as great an apostasy as is divorce. There are, unfortunately, wandering sisters, those who have broken away from their obedience and have no fixed place in any Community. They do great harm to the cause of the Religious life by the very faults that made them unworthy members of it. But, such is the weakness of our human hearts, if it were not for the strength of the life vow, if we were free to leave at any time, might not any one of us, in some moment of weakness, yield to a passing temptation and become even as they, restless wanderers driven forth and ever forward by a spirit of discontent? If in the marriage vow it is said, "What God hath joined let not man put asunder," how much more is it true of this—What is joined to God, let not man put asunder! Keeping the vow, then, is the cleaving of the soul to God; and so long as it is in living touch with Him, just so long will it receive the stream of divine grace flowing into it, making it beautiful, making it strong, the wonder alike of its enemies and its friends.

In itself the soul is weak, and it would seem to the naturally minded to be made weaker by its vow, cut off as it is from the natural helps

to virtue and piety, and many things made sin to it that are not to one who has taken no vow, and surrounded by many more enemies both human and diabolic by reason of it. But the vow is supernaturally strong, in that it binds the soul to God, and so through it the soul receives grace to conquer. The cutting off of human helps is but to draw us closer to the Divine Helper. It is a slender cord, to all appearances so easily broken and yet held by omnipotent strength. Not till we ourselves have slackened our grasp upon it does it weaken; none but ourselves can break it.

This cord is made up of three strands, the three vows—or more accurately speaking, the three parts of one vow—being poverty, chastity, and obedience.

The Virgin life should be a life of holy poverty, a renunciation of wealth, or the pursuit of it, that the whole time may be consecrated to works of mercy and the worship of God. Yet holy poverty does not mean bitter want. On the contrary, our Lord promised those who embraced this life a sufficiency of all things needful; “For your Heavenly Father knoweth ye have need of these things,” He said. But having food and raiment therewith to be content, content with the daily supply, not laying up for



the morrow or being anxious about it, that is the spirit of holy poverty. In this age and in this country, where the pursuit of money is so absorbing, so fierce, when so many souls make shipwreck of their eternal hopes upon the golden, treacherous shoals of Mammon, it is of special value to have here and there, examples of holy poverty to bring back to men's minds a saner and happier ideal of living, to recall to them the fact of God's Providence which supplies all our real needs, even when every faculty is stretched to obtain for ourselves what we do not need, and to show by contrast the sordidness and narrowness, the vulgarity even, of mere worldly wealth compared with the breadth and calm of the heavenly riches. That there should be some in the world who believe in the reality and value of these Heavenly riches and are willing to renounce worldly wealth for them, will help to raise the eyes of many others to those same riches, to calm the fever in their blood, to seek their portion in them. To have settled Communities having God for their portion and caring for no other, must be a blessing to any people. How important, then, is it for those Communities to be true to the ideal God has set them, truly to love holy poverty, never to desire anything but what God freely gives us. True,

we may ask both Him and His stewards for what we have need of—pride is a sin as well as avarice—but to be perfectly content whether it be little or much, and whatsoever we have, to share with others. We may own nothing for ourselves, though the Community may be enriched through us; to endure labors, hardships, coarse clothing and poor beds, crowding, perhaps, as the poor are crowded, with all its attendant inconveniences, is our privilege in the fulfilment of the vow of poverty. If we count it not as a privilege, if we make it a subject of discontent and complaint, we are in so far false to our vow.

As the vow of poverty is the sacrifice of the mind and its ambitions, the renunciation of the world and its rewards, the vow of chastity involves the affections, the ties of family and home, the hope so dear to every woman's heart of wifehood and motherhood. So the affections and desires of the heart are not stifled, not killed, but made sacrificial in their nature, and our hearts, united to the Human Heart of Jesus Christ, are offered upon the altar of the vow to God. When His love becomes supreme in the soul, and that and nothing else is the object of the vow of chastity, all other loves must be held in subordination to the mastery of that one love,

given up to it, may be, enduring separation, may be, or perhaps strengthened and satisfied, but always held loosely and subject to His will. And it also involves the taking up into the heart new and strange loves, such as it had not known before; the love of the poor in spite of their faults, the love of strangers in the duty of hospitality, remembering always the wonderful possibility of their being angels or messengers of God to us; the love of the Community, our adopted family, which is to us in the place of that which we have renounced; and hardest of all, love of our enemies, since Christ died for them also, and for us when we were enemies to Him. This imperious Love of God dominating our hearts, forbids us ever to desire other loves than He allows us, forbids us to doubt or question in any way or at any time His love for us, and forbids us, too, to rest in any love but His, even in any love that He Himself has provided for us, such as our Community, or our poor. Our love may go out to others, it must dwell only in Him. The heart that is offered up to God in the vow of chastity must be pure, must be aflame, must be constant; virgin and alight with the fire of the Holy Ghost, and God's till death—the Virgin's heart, the Apostle's heart, the Martyr's heart—such is the offering He de-

lights in, such is the love our Lord craves even in the glories of Heaven. Such hearts are forged in the crucible of Divine love, they can be found only at the foot of the Cross.

The vow of obedience involves the renunciation of the will. It is fundamental to the Community life, which could not exist without it. It is perhaps the most important of the three vows in its discipline of character, the will being the last stronghold of the creature in conflict with his Creator, it being harder to obey than to renounce. It is a mistake to suppose that it reduces men and women to the status of children, for the law is really universal; as no business, no society, no domestic life could be carried on without obedience of one to another. In the Community life the vow is twofold in its requirements: obedience to Rule, and obedience to Superiors, the one covering the stated acts and times of each day, the other its occasional and varied duties. Now this obedience, while it disciplines and trains the will, no more destroys it than chastity destroys the heart or poverty the mind. Self-mastery is never self-destruction. On the contrary, it enables to a completer and higher use of all the faculties, and religious obedience in destroying self-will, really gives self-mastery. For all rightful au-



thority has its true source in God; and in obeying it, we are really giving obedience to God; in rebelling against it, we are in rebellion against Him; in usurping it when it is not rightfully ours, we are assuming His prerogatives. Obedience cultivates in the soul the virtues of humility, patience, and fidelity, strong virtues all, the virtues of Virgins, of Apostles, and of Martyrs—and it subdues the vices of pride, self-will, and imperiousness, the sins that lie at the root of most of our failures. Who then would wish to be without its holy discipline? Let such not think to enter the Community life, and those in Communities that are set over them as head over all must learn to be servants of all, if indeed they are minded to rule in the spirit of the Lord.

Such is the threefold vow, its extent and its requirements. It extends throughout the whole of life, it requires the submission of every part of us to the Yoke of Christ. In reality it is binding upon every Christian, and practically every good and devout Christian conforms his life to it more or less. Are we appalled at the burden of it? But in truth it is no burden, but a means by which we may carry our life burden of sins, of sorrows, of labors, and of disappointments, and the more easily and the more surely



be guided to our true goal. The undisciplined soul is indeed to be pitied, and who would not prefer the calm and peace of a deliberate choice of God's will, to the vagaries and final failure of self-will? We must all serve in a free or forced obedience. Shall it be as children in the House of the Lord, or as slaves in the dark abode of Satanic hate? Obedience to God is the true freedom of man, and the religious vow which is a help thereto is a staff in our hand placed there by the Church at our Baptism, and made into a cross at its renewal in the Religious life. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me."

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE COMMON LIFE.



SOME people object to the Community life on the ground that the Virgin life can be lived to better advantage at home, that there are more opportunities for doing good, more ways of self sacrifice in the common round of daily family life than can be obtained by breaking those ties, involving others in the same sacrifices and setting oneself apart from the interests and sympathies of people whom it is our professed object to help. Such objections being the strongest argument that the opponents of Sisterhoods have, they are the most frequently urged in ever varying forms, and sometimes cause real trouble to devout souls seriously considering their call to the Community life.

It may be answered that the argument, like

most fallacies, overlooks one essential point. Most families indeed, offer almost limitless opportunities for self-sacrifice and humble, unthanked service, both of which are exhausting to the soul's supply of grace; few, if any, can offer means of restoring those supplies to the soul. It is true that grace is given us to be used for others, but when the vessel is emptied, and our souls are so shallow, they can hold but little at a time, it must be filled again at the Divine Source of all grace. It is this process of filling in order to empty and emptying in order to fill again, that makes all spiritual growth. It is for this reason that the household drudge so rarely becomes a bright and beautiful saint of God, though living constantly a life of self-sacrifice. We all know the type of old maid serving patiently as a family helper, and yet belittled by gossip, by some odd frivolity of dress, by shallowness of mind; whom we pity and do not admire, even while admitting she is not living for herself but for others; for others but not for God.

But this is not a mere theory. As a matter of fact, both ways of serving God in a consecrated life have been tried by the Church, and the Common life has been preferred to the family life after actual trial of both. The Virgins

of the Early Church consecrated themselves to God by life vows, but remained in their own homes, or those who had heathen families were adopted into some Christian household, and so tried to serve God. And they did valuable and well appreciated work for the Church, ministering to the poor, caring for the sick in plague stricken cities, consoling prisoners, and often themselves winning the crown of martyrdom. Yet we find from St. Cyprian's letter to Virgins, that there were serious abuses among them arising from the lack of the Common life with its strict oversight of individual members, that there were wolverines among these lambs of Christ's flock; and while that does not seem to the great Carthaginian Bishop any reason for destroying the whole flock, a somewhat modern method of reformation which we do not find in the fathers of the Early Church, he endeavors to correct the abuses by a pastoral letter, not yet having discovered the remedy of the Common life which was almost universally adopted by the Virgins a hundred years later. It is a significant fact that the Church having once established the Common life for her Virgins, never went back to the old way of the family life, and that during the three hundred years, more or less, in which the English branch of the Church

was deprived—chiefly by political oppression—of the Common life, she had no professed and consecrated Virgins. It is a full answer, therefore, and surely a satisfactory one to all who are not blinded by prejudice, that the other way, the Virgin life at home, has been tried and found not so satisfactory as the Virgin life in Community. If we may, then, consider the objections to the Common life answered in some degree, we are free to study it in its requirements, its difficulties, and its advantages.

The Common life has three absolute requirements, without which it cannot be carried on—a rule, a head, and a house. There must be rule to which all are pledged in full and equal obedience. The importance of rule both in the individual life and in Community has already been touched upon, and what was said then of the discipline of character and harmony of the whole produced by rule need not be repeated here; but the rule, whether light or severe in its character, must be fixed and definite, binding the various elements into one. Wherever rule is minimized either the Community life becomes disintegrated or too much power is vested in the head, and the authority becomes arbitrary. The rule of a Community is like the



law of a country, it safeguards the interests of both governing and governed.

But it is just as important to have a head as it is to have a rule; a head whose powers are limited by the rule, but who can see that the rule is equally and impartially administered and observed, who can initiate work and provide for its continuance, who can adjust differences, who can direct and moderate the over-zealous, and can stimulate and encourage the indolent or timid, who has general oversight of all the work and will not suffer the interests of one to be sacrificed to another part, who will cultivate the religious spirit in the Community as a whole and in each individual member. A good Superior must have limitless patience and tact. She must be most exact in her own observance of the rule and most devout in her spiritual life, for she by her example sets the tone of the whole Community. She must be calm and self-contained, not given to confidences and always remembering that a half hour's irritability may undo the work of months. A seal of silence is a great safeguard to a Superior, who must yet know how to start and direct the conversation of the household, never letting it go beyond the limits of charity or modesty, nor yet allowing it to become either

gossippy or gloomy. Her own serenity never disturbed, she must uphold the courage of all in times of discouragement, must be ready with a solution for every perplexity, must have good common sense, with discrimination of character and yet impartiality towards all, with warm affections and clear judgment. She must be the humblest woman in the house, the first to ask pardon for an offense, the most ready to forgive, the quickest to see her own faults, the most penitent in self-examination and confession, and yet able to maintain the dignity of her position to exact obedience and respect from all her subordinates. Truly if the woman can be found who can meet such requirements, it may be said of her, "Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all." Of course it is not pretended that every or even any Superior reaches and maintains this ideal of character and conduct, but that such is the ideal, all the writers on Community life agree, and it is well to give it prominence, both to stir up the pure wills of the members of Sisterhoods in their choice of their head, and to disarm the too ready criticism of the world on the authority vested in the Superior.

And then with the rule and the head, it is important to have a house. The members of

the Community must have a fixed place of residence. It will not do for them to be scattered into various homes and meet for certain fixed hours every day under their head; such is the plan on which some of our Associate Missions are carried on, such was the plan on which the Ursuline order was founded, but it is never successful. The Sisterhood must be a unit, a Christian family among the families of earth brought together and held together, not by the tie of blood but by common union with Christ. And it must have its home apart from others, in which its family life is carried on in its own distinct unity, from which the influence of the Sisterhood may radiate as from a centre, but into which all its powers are gathered up for concentration and renewal at the hours of prayer and meditation.

The house must have two centres or rallying points: a chapel for the spiritual life and a common room for the social life. No exigences of work or overcrowding should induce a Community to dispense with either of these two rooms. A chapel is a necessity, not only for the common services but for the private devotions of the Community as well. The dormitories may be crowded, but there is always a solitary spot in the chapel apart from the noise and

hurry of a busy life, and hallowed by memories of past blessings, where the sister may feel herself alone before God, where she may pour out to His sympathizing ear her trials and difficulties, where she may renew her vows of loving service and her exhausted stores of grace. It is the place where the whole Community meets seven times in each day to unite in praise of God and in prayer to Him, and where each feels the common bond that unites the whole Sisterhood, encircling her with renewed power. And it is here that the true Bread of Life is given to hungry souls, daily if it may be, at least as often as possible.

Second in importance to the chapel is the common room, where once in each day all the members of the Community are gathered for recreation and the interchange of social life, where the individual members become acquainted with one another, and individual qualities are brought out, not in the strain of work but in the pleasant relaxation of conversation. The lighter and more graceful faculties are given play, and courtesy towards and kindly interest in one another are cultivated. Many a little stiffness and soreness is smoothed away by an hour of genial intercourse, and homesickness melts away in the warmth and friendliness of a



home life as real as, though differing in some of its features from, the home life left behind.

The house may be in the beginning a rented house, but it is advisable sooner or later for the Community to own its house, both for the sake of permanence and of adaptability to its needs. The early Franciscans objected to owning a house because it was property and therefore contrary to the vow of poverty, but their own subsequent history shows the importance of a fixed place of residence for a Community, there being few greater evils or scandals in the religious life than wandering sisters or unsettled monks.

There are of course difficulties in living the Community life. People are human still and retain their human frailties, even when really consecrated to God. It is perhaps harder for women to live together in peace and harmony than for men, being naturally of a more nervous and sensitive temperament. And in every Community there are brought together very opposite dispositions with differing degrees of refinement and education. And in every such comingling it is the most refined and the best educated who have to make the largest sacrifices, because more capable of them. This must be counted in that summing up of the cost which



every sensible person must make before entering upon such a life. It is part, and a very real part, of the vow of poverty.

Then, too, in every Community, even small ones, there are some on trial who have no true vocation, no real consecration, coming and going, for short periods, perhaps, but to be borne with patiently while in residence. In the Community itself, where perhaps all are consecrated, there are some more completely so than others, and the higher ideal must not give way to the lower, hence a constant strain upon the spiritual life, the striving after or the maintenance of the high ideal with a lower one constantly battling for recognition.

Then there can be but one head in any Community, and the duty of obedience is sometimes very hard to one accustomed to her personal liberty, perhaps by nature better fitted to rule than the elected head, and it is often just as hard to one who is not fitted to rule at all. And the Superior herself has greatly misconceived her position and her duties if she does not consider herself chosen to be the servant of all, bound to a more exacting obedience than any of her sisters. In Sisterhoods where the election of a Superior is not for life, the difficult art must be learned of stepping down from a position of

authority to one of subordination, of seeing one's favorite methods superseded by others, of coöperating heartily with plans the opposite, perhaps, of one's own devising.

But where is the grace to come from to meet such large demands upon frail human nature? Where, indeed, but from the religious life itself, of which the chapel is the central point in the house, the common services, especially the frequent Communion, the hour of private meditation and prayer, the self-examinations and penitent confessions with the wise counsel of the Community chaplain, careful in spiritual direction of the needs of each soul committed to his care. The importance of Confession in Sisterhood life can hardly be overestimated. It is an effectual check upon the brooding over real or fancied wrongs, it heals the breaches made by impatience and selfishness in the household, it stirs up spiritual fervor when the first love is beginning to grow cold, it holds the Community up to the observance of its rule when there is an epidemic of laxity, and controls and modifies a zeal that is injurious to health, it encourages and renews the faith of the discouraged, and checks the self-elation of the successful. It is a ministry of healing in the household, and no religious Community can afford to dispense

with it. It should be made a part of the Rule with a minimum observance obligatory upon every member of the Community. If the objection be made that this is a curtailment of individual Christian liberty, we may answer, so is every part of the rule; and while confession is not obligatory upon members of the Church at large, neither is the Community life. If there be any personal objections to confession, there are still greater ones to that person entering upon a state of life in which confession is so necessary.

Having touched upon the difficulties of the Community life, let us now consider its advantages.

First, it is educational in the very best sense of the word. The standard is set by the best in the Community. It is a levelling up, not a levelling down; if not in mind and in special acquirements, yet in that best part of education, good manners. Courtesy towards each other, neatness in person and in dress, orderliness in the household, modesty in speaking of oneself, readiness to admire or at least to be interested in others, gentleness in manner, with softness of modulation and distinctness of utterance in speech, are Christian duties with the sister and cultivated as such. There should be nothing

slovenly nor unfinished about the well-trained sister. Grace of manner, combined with complete self-forgetfulness, is the ideal on which she is formed, the outward grace springing from that inward fountain of grace from which she draws all her supplies for every human need; and so her manners are not a veneer, a surface polish, an imitation, but the real gentility of Christian courtesy.

Another advantage of Community life is its broadening effect upon the character. A worldly life is very narrowing to the mind. The business man takes no interest in the man of letters, and *vice versa*. A man shows his breadth of mind by the multitude and variety of his interests, and most men, even some very cultivated men, judged by that test, would be found very narrow in mind.

And if that is true of men, how much more is it true of women? The cares of her nursery or her household, of her parish societies or her clubs, or of her social duties, are by turns all absorbing to a woman. Few are able to combine in just proportions even two of these interests at any one period of her life; but in a Community there is a constant tendency to broaden the mind by change and interchange of occupation, producing larger and more varied



interests. The care of children to a Sister makes all childhood interesting, while in the merely natural mother it often limits her interests and sympathies to her own brood. Nursing the sick is done on the same large principles by a Sisterhood, and housework becomes an intellectual occupation when accompanied with prayer and meditation and done with the zeal of God's service.

The Sister's points of contact with the world are more numerous and deeper than those of the ordinary woman, for they are with the soul's life as well as with the external circumstances, whereas in ordinary social life we rarely penetrate below the surface. But the sister is equally at home in the kitchen of the poor and the drawing-room of the wealthy, unshaken in her serenity either by the coarseness of poverty or the arrogance of riches, self-assertive with neither, courteous to both. When we consider the peculiarities and frivolities of the old maid, so frequently and so coarsely criticised and caricatured in the world, and then turning to the Sisterhood life, find those imperfections conspicuously absent, we may realize how much the Common life does for women in refining and broadening, in developing and exercising



the lesser graces, the minor beauties of character that make for loveliness.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE TEMPTATIONS OF THE COMMUNITY LIFE.



It is somewhat strange that among all the objections urged against the Community life by its opponents, there is never a word of its real dangers and temptations. For an account of these with grave and tender cautions against them we must go to the pages of its warmest advocates.

There is something certainly puerile in attacking an institution without taking the trouble to acquaint oneself sufficiently with it to know what its weak points really are, and if the objectors could know how most of their arguments sound to those who have really made a study of the Religious life, they would be silent from very confusion. That the life has its special temptations and dangers is no more than

saying that it is a human mode of life in a sin-stricken world. There is a large exemption granted from many temptations that assail one in the world. The sins of Dives, those of luxury, of vanity, of selfish ease and forgetfulness of the poor, scarcely knock at the door of our religious houses, where plain living and high thinking without either austerity or excess are the rule. Likewise the sins of the Magdalen, of unchastity, that alas! permeate even the upper ranks of our social life and are gradually destroying the sanctity of marriage, find no place among the Virgin hearts that have surrendered themselves to the keeping of Christ. And if the subtler sin of the Pharisee, spiritual pride, the "I am holier than thou," does creep in, it can find no large place in a life whose holiness is hotly contested by the majority of those in whose praise pride delights.

No, the temptations are not these, and surely a mode of life that can protect the soul from such as these is at least well worth study by those who abhor sin and who believe in fleeing from temptation. And yet the life has its own peculiar temptations, so peculiar to itself that the untried soul, fresh from the grosser forms of sin that have assailed it outside of the cloister, may fail to recognize these as sin, and

therein lies their especial danger. Indeed they have sometimes been hailed as virtues by those who ought to have known better, and their voluntary victims looked upon as heroines of romance or modern martyrs. Of course the unrepentant sinner, whether in the world or in the cloister, never recognizes her own sin, and always self-deceived, sometimes succeeds in deceiving others; but dupes as a rule have some interests of their own to serve in being duped.

First, and perhaps most dangerous, is spiritual discontent, *accidie*, as the theologians call it. Sourness of spirit was the name our forefathers gave it; lukewarmness or love grown cold, according to Saint John. After great exaltation there inevitably comes a natural reaction; our fine gold becomes dim, our strongest resolves seem like tow. It is in such times of weakness that *accidie* assails us. The inner life of the spirit, in which, like Enoch of old, we have walked with God, has suddenly lost its reality to us, has become dim and shadowy and unsubstantial, and a cold materialism which we call common sense, pronounces the whole experience through which we have passed a dream of folly. Or it may come in a form harder to resist, in a slow, scarcely perceptible slackening of fervor, a loss of interest in the services which

gradually spreads to the work and the life of the Community, a spiritual and mental indolence that in time becomes physical also, and every part of the rule becomes a burden, evaded where possible, and obeyed only with grumbling and dislike. The Sister who yields to the approaches of this temptation gradually loses her cheerfulness and often with it her health, for having lost delight in spiritual things, what delight has she left? And consumed with self-pity, she feels that she has made a fatal mistake. Then comes the stage of irritability with her companions, of rebellion against her superiors, of her withdrawal from the Community either to seek some other sisterhood, with like results, or to justify herself by writing a book or giving lectures on the evils of the Community life as seen through the green and seasick spectacles of *accidie*. Egotism is the foundation of the whole mischief, and such characters are sure to betray themselves as thoroughly egotistic, only satisfied when talking of their experiences, their opinions, their virtues, their misfortunes. It must be resisted in its first approaches, for by its very nature it becomes impossible to resist in its later stages. The first temptation to lie abed in the morning beyond the appointed hour, to get oneself excused from private meditation



or common services for insufficient reason, to shirk one's share of common work, or to absent oneself from the common social hour, will be followed up by succeeding temptations of like nature with increasing frequency unless the first one is resisted. Let the devout soul, then, take alarm at these first indications of the diseased spirit, at meditations that end in self-contemplation, at every pleasurable thought of self, and guarding herself by prayer, by confession, by increased effort of self sacrifice from the attacks of the enemy, she may make her very temptations a means of growth in grace. Herein lies the difference between *accidie* and the spiritual desolation of the Saints. Desolation is the temptation to *accidie* stoutly and persistently resisted, never for a moment yielded to, and so remaining temptation only and not sin, it becomes the crucible in which the quality of saints is tried by fire, spiritual fire and affliction. It has been sanctified to us by our Lord's sufferings in Gethsemane and on the cross and ever since He trod it, it has been the *via purgativa* of His most faithful followers. But remember it is the resistance to the temptation that makes the desolation and the saint; yielding to it makes us fallen stars, clouds without

water driven of contrary winds, a wavering wave of the sea, a lost vocation, a broken vow.

Another temptation, innocent in appearance and yet fruitful in disaster both to the Community life and to the individual vocation if yielded to, is that of undue intimacies. It is a duty to love all in the Community, but it would be abnormal and therefore a distortion of our human nature to love all equally or in the same way. There are natural affinities that draw certain members of a Community together as necessarily as the magnet draws iron, and it is a real maiming of the character as is done in some Roman Sisterhoods always to separate those who are especially drawn to one another. Our Lord in having a beloved disciple has shown us that we may have our human attachments, and He has also shown us their limits. It is true St. John leaned upon His bosom at the Last Supper and was chosen to be the caretaker of the Blessed Virgin, but no favor was ever shown him above the others. He was rebuked as sharply as St. Peter when need was, he was denied the only request he ever made publicly; when he was deputed by the others to ask about the betrayer, he was answered in an enigma as any of them would have been. Can we have our affections without partiality, without loss of

reserve, without taking from others, time or consideration or service due to them, in order to give it to the one chiefly beloved? Then there is no sin. But the temptation to an extravagant affection, that leads a sister to absent herself from the common social life for more intimate and private converse with her friend, to the interchange of a hundred little partialities in which others have no share, gives rise to heart burnings and jealousies, to the formation of cliques and the gradual disintegration of the common life. The temptation to such intimacies should, therefore, be steadily resisted with all their tendencies to flatter egotism and narrow the sympathies. The tide of love should flow through a religious house in a full and even current, not as a tumultuous and perhaps destructive torrent.

Another temptation of the Community life is to the loss of the sense of individual responsibility. When the day is parcelled out into its hours of work and of prayer, duties assigned and every detail of the life provided for, the Community and the Rule sometimes become paramount; and the sister may lose sight of the fact that, after all, they are only means to an end, not the end itself, which is the union of the soul to Christ, and so a mechanical routine may

take the place of individual impulse and sap the soul's energy. This is sometimes the case with very perfectly trained sisters, who seem to be fulfilling their vocation admirably, but the flaw shows itself when they are called to some position of responsibility, or are obliged to meet some unlooked for emergency and they are unable to stand the test. This fault may show itself in other ways also, such as the narrowing of the sympathies, the lack of interest in things outside the Community, or even promoting the interests of the Community at the expense of personal integrity, and excusing it to oneself on the ground that it is not a personal aggrandizement that is sought. This throwing of one's personal responsibility upon the Community comes from a sort of spiritual indolence that is content with prescribed forms and ceremonies without entering earnestly into their spirit, an externalism very fatal to the interior life. It is impossible so long as the soul is in intimate and constant Communion with her Lord, referring everything to Him, sensitive to the least whisper of His voice. Contact with Him must be individual or not at all, and that being the real end of the religious life, when it is attained it keeps all the various parts of it in subordination to itself and in harmony with one another.



Let us touch briefly upon still another form of temptation not uncommon in the Community life; and that is claiming a precedence for oneself or an immunity from certain things because one is a sister. It may be noted that this is just the opposite to the last mentioned in form—that being to hide oneself behind the Community, this to merge the Community into oneself. It is certainly a great mistake to suppose that being the servant of Christ and wearing His livery exempts one from bearing the lesser burdens of humanity. On the contrary, our Lord Himself gives us the Command—“He that is greatest among you shall be your servant”—and it is most contrary to His spirit to be aggrieved at some lack of courtesy or respect in our daily intercourse with the outside world. A sister should be as willing to stand in the street car as any other woman, must expect to be jostled in a crowd or to wait her turn at ticket office or bank, should stand back for others to pass in any press. As a matter of fact, many little courtesies are shown her in the business world on account of her habit, but she should never presume upon them, and always receive them when tendered with gratitude, never as a matter of right. Meekness and lowliness of spirit are expected of those who wear the livery of



Christ's household servants. Most unfortunate it is when their absence is emphasized by the garb.

It may be asked where is the advantage of fleeing from temptation in the world, only to meet with it in new and subtler forms in the cloister. And indeed there is no advantage. If that be one's only motive for entering the religious life, if there be no personal constraining love of Christ and obedience to His calling in the heart, it would be far better to remain in the world. There is no place on this earth hermetically sealed from temptation, nor is there meant to be. The reason may be beyond our comprehension, but the fact is clear to us all: that in this life we are tried by temptation, and that no condition of life exempts us from it. The form of it may change, the essence remains the same. Temptation is a sieve by which the chaff is sifted from the wheat. It is in the devil's hands, but he is not free in its use, being checked and restrained by the preventive grace of God. He may sorely trouble the good wheat but not a grain of it may he appropriate; only the chaff is his. And so temptation is constantly separating the bad from the good, keeping the good from being contaminated, showing the hideousness, the final end of evil. And while it

has this effect in the world, and to a very considerable extent the good and bad are really separated even there, so in the individual, the chaff, the weaknesses, the evil tendencies are gradually eliminated by the process of repeated sifting, the resistance to daily temptation; and there is no saint in all God's kalendar recorded in heaven, but owes his strongest claim to blessedness to the steady, unwavering conflict with evil. If yielding to temptation makes sinners, resistance to it makes saints; and the conflict, though necessarily taking different forms, less gross, more subtilized, more spiritual, is waged as vigorously and as constantly in the cloister as in the world. Hence the need of confession and absolution in the religious life. There are probably no sincerer penitents before God's tribunal than are to be found in our Sisterhoods among women of exceptionally holy lives, to whom self-sacrifice is second nature, and devotion the very air they breathe. It is not necessary to have sinned grossly to be deeply penitent. Indeed the grosser forms of sin usually make the conscience obtuse and callous, and penitence, as a pure and holy passion, is rarely found at all, perhaps, and only among those whose nearness to God renders them pain-

fully and keenly alive to the least spot of sin in themselves.

Not until we have met and successfully resisted temptation and sin in ourselves, can we cope with them in others. We must be able to recognize these when we see them under whatever disguise, by having studied them in and expelled them from ourselves. Then are we ready to fight them outside. Of course the internal and external conflict must in most cases go on at the same time, but the internal conflict must be considerably advanced before we can begin to have success in the external conflict; the struggle with vice and crime in our great cities, with brutality and indifference in our rural neighborhoods. It is one of the greatest trials of the religious life, this delicate sensitiveness to sin and yet constant contact with it in its most loathsome forms, its most unbecoming consequences; but some one must do it if the plague is to be kept from spreading. If children are to be rescued from evil surroundings, if there are to be cases of real repentance and amendment among adults, there must be some not afraid to touch the sore spots of our boasted civilization, to meet sin and contend with it for the souls of men; and such is the high office, the painful privilege, of the virgin

life. Only truly virgin souls may dare such a work, those who by prayer and self-discipline are to some extent immunes, that will not be in danger of themselves taking the disease and further spreading it. Only those who are themselves true penitents can offer up intercessions for the sins of humanity, those sins that go up from our centres of population like the smoke of a great furnace, crying aloud for retribution from a just and sinless God. What could stay the hand of the destroying angel save the prayers of repentance? And such is part of the work of our Sisterhoods. Weak and feeble as are their prayers, imperfect as is their penitence, yet they reach the Throne of the All Merciful, who is ever more ready to spare than to strike; and who can tell how mighty these frail intercessions become when they have touched Omnipotence?

## CHAPTER VIII.

### POPULAR OBJECTIONS TO THE COMMUNITY LIFE.



HERE is a strong popular prejudice to the Community life fed by misconception and ignorance, and always strongest when the spiritual life of the Church is at its lowest and her spiritual claims most disputed. Some of these misconceptions have been touched upon and answered in preceding chapters, the real dangers rarely or never embodied in popular objections have also been pointed out, and there remain now, some of the favorite stock arguments against the Community life to be disposed of. One of these is that a convent is a prison into which young girls are decoyed and shut up for life. It would be almost too absurd to answer were it not that some people actually think it, unthinkable as it would seem by any



person in the possession of his reason. Setting aside the character of the women who form our Sisterhoods and whose lives of devoted charity to the sick and poor and orphaned should place them above such suspicion, the utter impossibility of such a thing is at once evident, young girls not being as easy to decoy as ducks, and being still more difficult to conceal from the search of frantic relations, and being themselves utterly useless in any work to which they are unwillingly compelled as every mistress of a boarding school knows. Short indeed would be the career of our Sisterhoods if such were their recruits. On the contrary it is far more difficult to enter a Sisterhood than it is to leave it. There are guards placed at every step of the way to prevent the admission of unworthy and unwilling candidates. They are instructed in the rule, given experience of the work and life, subjected to various tests of character, put on long probation before they are allowed to take the life vow that binds them forever to the Community. It is a matter too important to the whole Community to be left in the hands of one or two superior officers, but every member of the Community has a voice in the election of a new sister, and mere faults of manner if uneradicated in the

discipline of the Novitiate are sometimes sufficient to rule out a candidate, so careful are the sisters about those who are to be associated with them for life. It may be well here to state that Sisterhoods also are not reformatories, as seems to be the impression in some quarters, judging from the applications from divorcees and morphine eaters that sometimes have to be rejected by our Sisterhoods. Only the best material, fully arrived at maturity, knowing their own minds and filled with the love of Christ and endowed with enough talent to make them successful in any sphere of life are wanted in our Communities. Raw girls, green enough to be decoyed, or romantic young women living in a world of unreality, or feeble minded persons too weak to resist the will of another, are not wanted and are speedily dismissed from every really active Community. So if our convents are prisons then are they filled with very willing prisoners rejoicing in their captivity, which is to Christ and not to the world, bonds voluntarily chosen and therefore that do not gall nor need to be gilded as the world's fetters must be before they can be worn.

It has been urged, but it is difficult to believe seriously, that our Sisterhoods are under the direction of Roman priests, Jesuits. Of course

the answer to that is in any of our Church Annuals, where the names of the Chaplains of our various sisterhoods are given, chaplains who are priests in good standing in the "Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America." Also the Bishops in whose Dioceses and under whose jurisdiction our Sisterhoods are placed, would be quite able to answer such objections if the propounders of them really cared enough about the truth to make inquiry. It is certainly crediting the Jesuits with a self-abnegation or a fatuity beyond their deserts, to suppose them to be fostering institutions in the Church from which they get neither credit nor profit and which are every day proving themselves bulwarks against the pretensions of Rome. Many of our laymen become converts to the Roman Church, a scattering few of our priests somewhat multiplied in the minds of people by their enthusiastic reception, but sisters from our Sisterhoods, never.\* A strange result, surely, of Jesuit direction if there were a shadow of truth in the absurd charge. Another objection to Sisterhoods is in their dress, and perhaps this objection can be best answered by giving the reasons why a uniform dress is

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\* This does not refer to wandering sisters unattached to any regular Community.

adopted. First, of course, economy—a consideration always with our Sisterhoods which aim to do the greatest amount of work possible with the smallest outlay of money, and in dressing a number of people it is always cheaper to buy goods by the piece and cut it out by the same pattern; and the second consideration is neatness, much more easily and surely attained where the dress is always the same; and a third is equality, all the Sisters having everything in common, no difference made even in their clothing, with no room for the indulgence of vanity or the receiving of gifts. There is another reason, too, of some importance. Most women spend much time and thought on their clothes, both in planning and wearing—a sister wearing her uniform never gives a thought to it, her new habit comes to her when the old is worn out, and being the same in cut and fit she is used to it at once, there is no sense of newness about it and she wears it as easily and unconsciously as an old garment. The dress is also a protection to a sister, respected as it is by the worst of men, and enables her to go unharmed through alleys and tenements that would be dangerous or scandalous for a lady not so protected. It is also a great advantage in travelling and in business, as it procures many little civilities and econ-



omies not otherwise attainable. The wholesale department of a store is always open to a sister, and cheaper rates of travel usually accorded her. All these reasons combined make the argument for a prescribed dress of irresistible weight. But the objection lies really more against the form of the dress than the fact of a uniform. Why should it be so like the Roman Sisters' dress? But really it is not. There is as great variety in the dress of the various orders of the Roman Church as in the uniforms of the various armies of Europe. That the essential characteristics are the same is necessitated by the fact that they are to be adapted to similar conditions. A dress that must be worn day in and day out for a year, must be made of stout material that will stand the wear and tear of every-day life, must be easily cleaned, and must be easy fitting, hanging from the shoulders and not from the waist. Given those essential requirements, sit down to design a dress and you will produce not a fac simile of the dress of any known Sisterhood, but one whose general appearance would remind you of a Sisterhood dress. The veil perhaps is the one exception to the severe utility of the dress, and the Sisters of Charity in the Roman Church do not wear it, replacing it with a large white linen cap or a



black crepe bonnet. But a dress to be perfect must be more than merely utilitarian, it must express in some manner the character, the inner self of the wearer. And woman's dress, so much more flexible than man's, usually does this, and it is one reason that it is such an absorbing theme for thought and conversation with most women. The sister's dress is no exception to this principle. Its symbolic character remains along with its general utility, and there is no part of it but what a sister may put on with prayer that it may be a true expression of her inner life, the veil expressing retirement and bereavement, the widowhood of the soul that is looking and longing for her Lord, and will content herself with no other joys; the girdle betokening patience and labor, the cloak the warm and ample folds of a life of charity. If our Sisterhoods are not living up to this promise of their habit, then pray to God for them instead of criticising them for high aims. Our aims ought to be high, and our realization of them higher than it is.

There are those who object to the life vow on account of its presumption, as they call it, tempting God by binding themselves for all time to a state of life when they know not what the future may bring forth, and so settling the

future for themselves which is and should be in God's hands only. Of course this objection works both ways, and if it is presumptuous to take the vows of virginity it is equally presumptuous to take the vows of marriage. The reasons for a life vow were discussed in a previous chapter, it is only this one point of presumption that need be taken up here, and if that is not sufficiently answered by applying the objection to the marriage vow, then we would humbly urge that there is as great presumption in refusing God's choice of us to be His virgins until death as to take the vows believing it to be His will. The objection applies only to those who rush into it without having their vocation tested, and how that can be in our long novitiates it is difficult to imagine. The lapsed sisters who have returned to the world are those who have yielded to the temptations that assail all who enter the life, rather than those who have mistaken their vocation. We may well ask ourselves whence comes this bitter prejudice, this wilful ignorance concerning an institution that has grown up among us so quietly and unostentatiously, whose fruits are so evidently those sweet and wholesome charities that are everywhere the true sign of the Church? Why is it that men and women otherwise intelligent and

well informed indulge in such absurd and extravagant suspicions, advance such puerile and baseless objections to a mode of life that should disarm suspicion by its innocence and charm even prejudice, by its good works? It aims to harm none and to be helpful to all. Even did it not fulfil its aim nearly so well as it does, why should it be subject to such bitter attacks as are never levelled against social organizations of a non-religious type, such as the social settlements? There are no objections made to our deaconesses as there are to sisters. Why? Because they are more useful? Hardly! Because they are more devoted? No such reason has been given. Indeed our objectors would be hard put to it to give a reason for their conscious bias against Sisterhoods, except the well-worn one that they are so like the Roman Catholic Sisterhoods, though they would themselves admit that the great institutions of the Roman Church must challenge their admiration, and its methods of work are worthy of imitation. It is indeed impossible to account for the bitter censure of a mode of life worthy of the highest praise, except by ascribing it to the subtle influence of the Prince of the power of the air, who is ever the enemy of all things that are good, and whom all Sisterhoods regard as their espe-

cial foe. If this seems fanciful to the somewhat materialistic common sense of the present day, we must not forget that the unseen world that lies about us has its forces of evil as well as of good. However, if some other theory can be found to fit the facts better, by all means let us have it. Let some one of our detractors study the philosophy of his objections to Community life and propound not baseless calumnies, but sober reasons, against it. Perhaps if we could understand the real grounds of so deep-seated and widespread a prejudice, much might be done to soften or remove it and smooth somewhat the path of the sister's life, surely difficult enough in this sin-laden world of ours without the added thorns of calumny.

## CHAPTER IX.

### HELPS AND HINDRANCES.



THE Estate of Virginity has been most highly prized in every age of the Church but this. St. Paul expresses himself most strongly in its favor. St. Cyprian, two hundred years later, extols it as the perfect flower of the Christian Faith. There is a sermon existing of the authorship of the Venerable Bede giving it unstinted praise. Its status during the Middle Ages and at the time of the Reformation is well known. It is impossible to read Church history without conceding to it an important place in the life and work of the Church itself. The argument from history is even more overwhelmingly in its favor than the argument of utility advanced in these pages, and claims a higher place for this favorite daughter of the Church



than we would venture to ask. We but desire toleration and freedom to make our choice unhampered by the prejudices, the calumnies, and the sordid arguments, sometimes amounting to positive prohibition when there is the authority, from those who call themselves our friends. History makes a claim so imperious and compelling that we have not dared to offer it here. But anyone who chooses to read and study may find it for himself. Community life invites investigation in its sources, in its progress, in its present condition. It bases its claim to your recognition on its utility, its historical connection with the Church, its Apostolic origin.

What, then, is the attitude that we as Christians should hold towards this new Institution, that is yet as old as the Church, that has taken its place among us so timidly, asking so little, and that yet has such large rights? What should we expect of Christian parents and what is to be hoped for from our priesthood?

When a daughter tells her mother the secret yearning of her heart for the religious life, what is the mother's response? Of old it was a fervent gratitude to God that He had so honored her child. What is it now? How many mothers willingly give up their daughters to all

the horrors of an unhappy marriage, rather than relinquish them to the cloister with its peace and holy communion with God?

Many are the young hearts that have been turned away from the vocation, the calling of God, by their mother, to their eternal loss; many that have persevered have been wounded and estranged by the harsh conduct of their parents in regard to their religious life. What mother has yet taught her daughter to look upon the virgin life as a high and holy privilege, not indeed to choose, but to follow if chosen? Some there have been found who have dedicated a son to the priesthood, but what mother has dedicated a daughter to God? Yet this ought to be, and this will be in another generation.

How much a mother might do toward smoothing the path and preparing the young soul for the renunciation of the world and for meeting the trials and difficulties of the Virgin life. She considers herself indeed remiss if she has not prepared her daughter for her married life; but what has she done for her young virgin daughter who, to follow her Lord, has left her home and her parents without a blessing from their lips or a God-speed upon her venture of faith? Authority is strained to the uttermost to prevent obedience to Christ, and where

authority fails, worldly seductions and temptations have often been tried. A Christian mother to become the temptress of her own daughter, and all to keep her from the love of Christ! Can such things be?

It is needful indeed to inquire into the strength and sincerity of her convictions, but need the inquiry be more strict and searching than it would be in case of a worldly betrothal? Is not God's love as safe for happiness as any human love? Family ties would not be so strained and broken by the religious life, if family opposition to it were removed. Interchange of visits would be frequent if they could be made pleasant and helpful; but where they but increase bitterness and strife, it is better to remain apart. And so a daughter loses her mother and all the help she could give her, and the mother the daughter, not from the religious life falsely charged with the separation, but from worldly passions.

How sweet it would be were the mother herself to lead her daughter to the door of the Virgin life, to follow her thither in religious retirement on many occasions, to endow with her prayers and her blessings the home of her child; as an Associate of the Sisterhood, to keep in touch with all that interests her daughter.

And the father has a duty here as well as the mother: to help, not to hinder; to give what he can afford, if not money, then of time, of sound business or professional advice to the Community of which his child is part; and such generous, large-hearted sympathy would reap its reward in the strengthening and securing of those very ties now so often snapped; for were the home congenial, the virgin daughter would have more frequent opportunities of revisiting the family hearth than does the married child.

And our priests, what are they doing for the religious life? Happy are we if we have not sermons levelled directly against it in our parish church, if we may secure a little supercilious toleration for it from those who feel and do not hesitate to say that the ordinary life is much to be preferred. All this piety, we hear, tends to make one conspicuous and is totally unnecessary. The work could be done just as well without it. Could it, indeed? Let them but try it and see for themselves. All charitable work except that done by religious orders is done for a salary. Men and women are paid for it as they are paid for stenography or book-keeping; and charity has become a business such as these. It requires an exalted piety con-



stantly kept aflame by the hours of devotion and meditation which only the Community life can provide, to keep one steadily to an uncongenial work making large demands upon one's time, and purse, and sympathy.

And our clergy should be the ones to foster and develop carefully the piety that bears such fruits; not seek to stunt or uproot it. They have large opportunities of directing young girls and older women who come to them in the enthusiasm of a newly awakened spirituality into the way of the religious life. Some few are faithful to their high calling and responsibility; but how many dissipate these virgin energies into feeble parish organizations, and exhaust them in the frivolities of sales and suppers? In Confirmation instructions and at the tribunal of penitence, many a word in season might be spoken, to gather in virgin souls to serve in the Lord's House, and a good word for the religious life might be said in many a sermon, clearing away the popular prejudice that cloud the minds of our people. Short-sighted indeed are our priests that are so wasting the powers of the Church, wasting by failing to use, or using for trivial purposes, vocations that, turned into their proper channel, might provide every Diocese with its Sisterhood



and so immensely increase the working force of the Church.

And would not the blessing return in double measure upon those who gave it? The devotional fervor fostered in the heart of another by their efforts and wise direction would be increased in their own lives and to their own order. More of our young men would be presenting themselves for holy orders if they had sisters in our religious houses stimulating them by their prayers and their example. How can we expect such great sacrifices from our young men (and great is the sacrifice of those who enter the priesthood) when we are discouraging it in our young women? Are the men naturally more spiritually-minded than the women, that we expect so much more of them? Capable of greater things they are, because God has made them to do the creative work of the world; but from the beginning of the Christian Church, the virgin was set beside the priest to do the woman's work and make the woman's sacrifices, as he was to do the man's part. God is never one-sided in His operations. Having given to women as well as to men the capacities for sacrifice and devotion, He expects those capacities to be used for Him and in His service. And what right has anyone to hold back

a loving soul from making the complete sacrifice, from breaking the box of alabaster and pouring the hoarded ointment on the Master's feet, not drop by drop, but all at once, in a complete and perfect concentration of the whole life?

The spirit of niggardliness and the spirit of sacrifice cannot exist side by side. . At least women's souls are not so made. If you are to get their highest efficiency out of them, you must let them waste themselves in entire consecration; and not only will the Lord's feet be anointed, but also His Head, and the whole house, His Church, will be filled with the odor of the ointment.

Life for life—yea, Lord, so let it be,  
My life for Thine, since Thine was given for me.  
How could I think a lesser gift to bring,  
Some broken, useless, fragmentary thing?

Nay, let it be the perfect crystal, Lord,  
Offered up whole, unbroken, and unmarred.  
No part kept back for self, or sin, or strife,  
But laid at Thy feet, the full price of a life.

Men see the work, which is the outer shell,  
The humble vessel, be it ill or well,  
That holds the life elixir for a space  
Ere it be poured from its discarded vase.

They only see the outside of the cup,  
Thou seest within the life that's offered up,  
The heart of love in penitence immersed.  
Drink, Lord of Life, and quench Thy loving thirst.



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